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ABSTRACT

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Translating Higher Reading Skills Into Measurable Behavior*

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Abstract

Competency-based education is a model that needs research and development before it can be successfully translated into classroom practices for teaching higher reading skills. Competency-based programs of reading instruction that stress cognitive rather than low level skills may encounter difficulty in performing a logical task analysis of higher reading skills; in spelling out competencies that consider cross-cultural differences in cognitive style; adapting instruction to the ecological variables that influence the individual learner; in providing teachers with adequate resources and in accomodating aesthetic, moral and interpersonal as well as cognitive goals.

Translating Higher Reading Skills Into Measurable Behavior

In order to forestall any disappointment on the part of the reader, and to avoid charges of misrepresenting my topic, it is only fair to indicate immediately that this is not a 'How-To' paper. On the contrary, this paper deals with several sources of difficulty that must be recognized and resolved before instruction in higher reading skills can be adapted to a competency-based model.

For an educator to select a competency-based model for all aspects of reading instruction at the present time implies faith more characteristic of a born-again Christian than a hardnosed scientist. For competency-based models are in fact just models. Skinnerians have a history of avoiding model building, but, in fact, the empirically related findings associated with behaviorism do fit or describe a model of behavior, and it is from this model that competency-based education is derived. At its worst competency-based education simplifies the problems of curriculum designers by ignoring complex issues, for stress on accountability in the narrow sense avoids major problems, and comforts those who want definite answers to complex dynamic and cognitive problems.

For a teacher, too, it is simpler to teach specific sets of skills if they are measurable and observable, particularly if a brighter colleague has completed the onerous taxonomic analysis of the curricular domain involved, developed criteria for assessing students' entering behavior, progress toward the goals of the course, designed various instructional strategies suited to individual needs and identified and collected a large store of appropriate reinforcers.

Unfortunately, reading specialists cannot pretend that such a Utopian situation exists, nor are there any signs of its imminent appearance over the educational horizon, or why is there so much concern over the reading abilities of so many groups of students at every level of the American educational system!

Before adopting an exclusively competency-based model for the teaching of higher reading skills, educators and psychologists who work in educational settings or engage in educational research should be aware of the following sources of difficulty in implementing such a model if goals are selected in both domains and at all levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

The Definition of Higher Reading Skills

Higher reading skills are no different from higher thinking skills. They involve such cognitive processes as recall, recognition and reconstruction, logical thinking, category formation, category identification, transfer and transposition. Although the matching of appropriate cognitive skills to a particular written text is a reading related skill, reading differs from oral communication only in the medium chosen to convey the message, not in the cognitive processes required to understand or evaluate it. Many reading specialists have atomized comprehension into a number of skills, and no doubt every reading specialist has a preferred array and hierarchy of such skills. However, Thorndike (1917) and Spearritt (1972) strongly suggest that reading comprehension rests predominantly upon vocabulary and reasoning. Factor analyses of standardized reading tests have failed to conclusively identify a number of distinct, identifiable reading subskills, presumably teachable through

a series of graded exercises. Since standardized reading tests whatever their drawbacks are the best instruments presently available for analyzing reading performance, there does not appear to be much empirical basis for fragmenting reading instruction into a variety of exercises and activities aimed at teaching probably imaginary subskills.

Not only does the nature of reading comprehension in our present state of knowledge resist logical task analysis, research also reveals that the comprehension of textual materials varies a great deal with student motivation and background knowledge as well as with difficulty level. If so-called higher reading skills do not exist, or do not lend themselves to instructional fragmentation, and if student motivation is truly an important variable in reading comprehension, then it makes sense to develop instructional goals that develop cognitive thinking skills across a variety of situations, and that help students to recognize which processes are appropriate to apply to which specific textual materials. Such a program is not totally within the domain of the reading specialist. It requires extensive use of a great variety of individually selected reading materials, the extensive use of time, both in and out of school devoted to reading, and the provision of opportunities for students to discuss their reading with peers and teachers. The competencies that might emerge from such a program would differ across individuals, and the progress at which different individuals acquired the ability to apply appropriate cognitive processes to textual materials independently would no doubt differ also. To formulate observable and measurable competencies that pursue goals such as these is currently a challenge for the professionals. The fact that cognitive abilities are not necessarily acquired

within short time periods such as a teaching unit or academic marking period should not discourage those who are convinced of the superiority of a competency-based model.

The Ecology of the Reader

Bronfenbrenner (1977) has pointed out that "...much of contemporary developmental psychology is the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible time." However, current conceptions within developmental psychology have been changing in the last decade. Psychologists such as Bronfenbrenner are moving towards a model and research methodologies that are concerned with the multiple environments composing an individual's life space and the relationships between these environments.

Traditionally we have studied how children learn to read with laboratory paradigms or within the confines of the traditional one-teacher, thirty-children classroom setting. But anybody who works with people and is the least bit sensitive knows that performance can vary with the physical setting and the persons in the setting. The traditional classroom has been the setting for successful reading instruction for many children, but it is not the only setting in which children learn to read, or in which children may want to read. That is why the results of one on one tutoring, whether by peers or adults, is probably so often successful. It also no doubt explains the amazing progress reported in the literature by Moore (1966) who has constructed specialized learning environments.

Let me insert here for comic relief, if not scientific edification, some anecdotal evidence of my own. A colleague of mine did her student

teaching many years ago in a second grade class. Among her other duties, she was assigned a particular child to tutor. Although friendly and cooperative, the child did not make spectacular progress under her guidance. Nevertheless, one day she noticed the child looking at a book. To her amazement his eye movements indicated that he was reading. She ran over to him and exclaimed enthusiastically, "You're reading!" The child responded by pressing his index finger to his lips and whispering, "Shh! Don't tell her!", indicating with his head that 'her' was the master teacher.

A competency-based model of education does not tell us how to proceed at this point, whereas an ecology of human development really begins here. To date competency-based education has dealt most successfully with the cognitive domain. It is unfortunate that for the sake of efficiency we cannot separate the learning child from the feeling child, but since we apparently cannot, competency-based models should strive to develop goals and methods that are consonant with an ecological psychology of learning and development.

The Role of the Teacher

A third area of difficulty in implementing competency-based instruction lies in the preparation and provisioning of our teachers. Teachers today are better trained than ever before, and reading achievement, at least in the elementary school, has been rising in the last decades. But it is a gross injustice to teach the rudiments of learning theory to education majors, in vitro, and then expect them as teachers, on the job, to analyze the difficulty level of all textual materials, to devise or locate tests to measure pupils' entering behavior, and progress

toward stated goals, to perform task analyses for all units of instruction, to keep accurate records of individual progress and to provide alternate materials, strategies of instruction and pacing for anywhere from 30 to 150 pupils daily. It is not only a gross injustice, it is unrealistic!

Nor is simply handing teachers a list of competencies and a packaged program the solution. Competencies devised entirely by other people and commercially prepared programs diminish professional initiative, implicitly denigrate professional judgment and fail to provide flexibility for different pupils at different times and in different communities.

These weaknesses of many competency-based programs do not imply that under ideal conditions a form of competency-based education would not be desirable. What is suggested is that at the present time many competency-based programs are narrowly conceived, make impossible demands upon teachers' time and skills while negating their intuitive and experiential knowledge. A successful competency-based program that has the support of classroom teachers should be conceived so as to give these teachers reasonable goals, reasonable support and reasonable freedom.

Culture, Cognition and Reading

A competency-based program of instruction in higher reading skills must also reflect recent research in the fields of anthropology, psycholinguistics and cross-cultural psychology. Cultural influences are so diverse that they preclude the possibility that all groups will benefit equally from overly specific educational guidelines. Only a superficial sampling of the current behavioral scientific research on cross-cultural variations in linguistic and cognitive performance can be mentioned here. However,

the findings have such clear and important implications for education that it is inconceivable that any model of education in a democratic, multicultural society could fail to accomodate these differences. A superior model of education will not only recognize these differences in order to facilitate the progress of some, but will exploit them to enrich the progress of all.

Important examples of work being done in reading related disciplines include studies by Abrahams and Troike (1972) and Kochman (1972), folklorists; Cole and his associates (1971), cross-cultural psychologists; and Hall and Freedle (1975) psycholinguists.

Abrahams and Kochman have studied the oral traditions and rhetorical devices and forms used in the Afro-American community. These linguistic styles could be cleverly and creatively used in the classroom to bridge the gap between school and community, encourage pupil participation and extend language development on the basis of familiar forms. Although we have moved away from the position that Black English is a defective or deficit language, we ought to be moving to a positive position which recognizes the important influence of the dialect on American English.

The work of Cole and his colleagues should alert us not only to the universal human ability to employ complicated cognitive processes to solve problems, but also to the fact that cultural preferences and habits facilitate or inhibit the use of particular cognitive strategies. The acquisition of higher reading skills as noted earlier is inseparable from the acquisition of cognitive abilities. To achieve high level literacy skills throughout the population requires different reinforcements, different reading materials, different techniques of instruction and teachers trained

to understand the cognitive style of their particular clientele.

Recent work by scholars such as Hall and Freedle indicates that the semantic systems of different cultural groups, speaking the same language differ considerably. At lower levels of reading comprehension where literal facts are stressed, this cultural-linguistic variability may not seriously affect comprehension scores, but as decisions, predictions and evaluations increasingly are called for, the minority group cultures are likely to suffer unless behavioral objectives or test items are written with sensitivity to these differences in mind.

Because America is a congeries of subcultures, the future work of behaviorial scientists should contribute importantly to the refinement of competency-based models of education. If we are to employ this model productively, educators need to know how culture affects students' perceptions of what is and what is not a reinforcer, what constitutes a problem to be solved, which skill or style is the familiar, preferred or culturally appropriate response to a particular situation.

When evaluating reading comprehension, competency-based programs need to develop alternatives to the traditional multiple choice format. A 'wrong' answer may represent a perfectly correct and logical choice within the student's cultural or linguistic group. Opportunities to discuss or defend a choice should be afforded before students are evaluated. When reading comprehension is the major goal of instruction, activities that enhance awareness of cultural relativity and the perspectives of others are indeed appropriate.

Alternatives Models of Education

Finally, whether one is teaching reading skills or any subject, the question of values arises. MacDonald (1966) has pointed out that the American way of life is a doing way. We value doing in all areas of life including education. Yet as social learning theorists attest much can be learned, not only by doing, but by watching and listening.

Should students be permitted to have certain experiences without furnishing proof of their improvement, immediate or longterm? Are positive formative and summative evaluations the only feedback the community and the educational establishment desire? As MacDonald suggests cognitive instructional objectives based on rational decisions are only one metaphor for instruction, and aesthetic, moral and interpersonal metaphors are defensible contenders for models of instruction too.

Should we abandon the competency-based model of education? No, not if we realize it <u>is</u> a model. However, to adopt an exclusively competency-based model for teaching higher reading skills before we have the necessary instrumentation, personnel and resources would be an unfair test of the model, and it would deprive children of many worthwhile experiences that surely do stimulate learning and enrich their lives. We should use the competency-based model in reading instruction where it is appropriate, and with a realistic awareness that in our current state of knowledge, such a model resists total translation into educational practice.

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